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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: “The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges”

Statement submitted by International Federation of University Women and Worldwide Organization for Women, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Education, a crucial foundation for rural women's economic empowerment

Access to quality education: a fundamental human right

Education is a human right that is fundamental to the achievement of many other human rights, the Millennium Development Goals and other internationally agreed goals and commitments. If we are to achieve the goal of equality between men and women, it is essential that boys and girls have equal access to education at all levels. While much has been accomplished towards providing access to universal primary education in the past decade, the elimination of gender disparity in primary and especially secondary education is far from being achieved.

In the ministerial declaration of the high-level segment of its substantive session of 2011, the Economic and Social Council reaffirmed that education is essential for human development, sustainable development, world peace, just and democratic societies and the promotion of all human rights. Among the concerns expressed were those related to insufficient progress, persistent educational inequities among and within countries and the high dropout rate, especially of girls in secondary education. In the declaration, it was stressed that access to education needs to be accelerated, particularly for out-of-school children, rural populations and people living in vulnerable situations.

Education and economic empowerment strongly linked

Investing in human potential advances many development goals, among them health and gender equality. Evidence shows that educated women have more options, which gives them more control over their lives. There is also a clearly established, positive relationship between keeping girls in school and future earning power, as reported by the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Adolescent Girls, with estimates showing that each year of secondary schooling increases their future wages by 10 to 20 per cent.

Recognition that education is crucial for the empowerment of young people, especially young women and girls, is not enough. We must also ensure that the necessary political will and financial resources are available to enable all young people to enjoy their fundamental human right to education and to ensure that the education they receive prepares them for their future lives.

Globally, too many adolescent girls will not complete secondary education as many leave school early to help support their families. Girls under the age of 16 make up more than 90 per cent of the global domestic workforce, and according to Human Rights Watch, 70 per cent of the 130 million out-of-school young people are girls. In 19 African countries, the secondary school completion rate for adolescent girls is below 5 per cent.

Barriers to and strategies for ensuring full access for rural girls

Poverty puts girls, especially rural girls, at a distinct disadvantage in terms of education. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, in the poorest households, approximately twice as many girls of secondary-

school age are out of school, compared with their wealthier peers. Girls are more often expected to remain at home looking after siblings and doing such household chores as cooking, cleaning and fetching water and firewood and farm work — or helping to augment family income. Many parents keep girls in school for as little time as possible because of their inability to afford school fees, uniforms, exercise books and supplies. Parents who perceive girls as having little potential for future income may opt not to invest in their education. Where a choice must be made, preference is still often given to boys.

If girls are to have full access to quality education, schooling, including the provision of uniforms, books and supplies, should be free until the final year of secondary level. Necessary investment needs to be found to provide financial stipends, to ensure easy access to clean water, near or on school grounds, and to increase access to cheap fuel, all of which will have a positive impact on girls' enrolment.

Distance to school and the lack of safe school environments are major barriers. Parents, concerned by the lack of safety for girls having to walk long distances to school and the lack of separate toilet facilities, keep girls, even the brightest ones, at home. Measures must be taken to ensure that girls can go to school safely and not be subjected to sexual or other forms of violence. Adapting school hours so that girls can travel between home and school in daylight hours, bringing schools closer to rural communities and the creation of better infrastructure to allow for more technologically advanced distance education programmes, are a few of the possible solutions.

If girls are to receive the education needed for their futures, other factors within communities must be addressed, among them the absence of positive role models. Owing to the persisting high rate of illiteracy, many adult rural women are not equipped to counsel the younger generations. Adult education programmes in rural areas must be intensified. Many rural communities also suffer from the absence or underrepresentation of female teachers. Financial incentives and safe housing are needed to attract more female teachers to these communities.

Traditional religious and cultural practices, such as female genital mutilation and early and/or forced marriage, contribute significantly to high rates of absenteeism and dropout from school. Evidence suggests that girls not enrolled in formal education have their first sexual experience and first child at an earlier age than girls enrolled in formal education and are more likely to be poor and forced into early marriage, or coerced into sex. They are more likely to leave school early, and to have little or no knowledge of sexuality, reproduction or HIV/AIDS. They are, therefore, more likely to be at risk, without access to contraception or health services, and to have too many children too close together. Conversely, educated women usually have their first sexual experience later, their first child later and have fewer children, who, as a result, are often healthier and better educated. Comprehensive sexuality education covering human rights, HIV prevention, gender equality, sexuality and active citizenship is a crucial part of formal and informal education.

Looking beyond access to quality education and future employment

If rural women are to achieve their full economic potential, we must look beyond school enrolment and completion, to question the quality and relevance of

the education provided. Students, particularly girls, must learn core and specialized skills that will equip them for entry into the labour market. In many rural areas, this need for skills is far from being met. The United Nations Development Programme estimates that students with five years of primary education, in some sub-Saharan countries, have a 40 per cent chance of being illiterate. Educated rural girls face disappointment if they are unable to find jobs that meet their qualifications. Other girls, seeing that staying in school does not lead to income, have little incentive to continue their education.

Many rural schools suffer from a shortage of qualified teaching personnel and equipment. Single teacher schools are often the norm, with teachers struggling to cope with large class sizes and a full range of subjects. In some cases, the teachers have little knowledge of some subjects that they are expected to teach. The level of tuition in science and mathematics, two subjects that are essential in today's technological world, is often below standard, or those subjects may even be absent from the curriculum. Even larger schools face the problem of relying on members of their teaching staff who lack the required academic and professional qualifications. Most rural schools operate with rudimentary infrastructures; few are equipped with modern information technology equipment. It is essential that strategies be found to attract more qualified teachers to rural areas and to provide adequate infrastructure.

Significant progress towards Goals 2 and 3 of the Millennium Development Goals has been noted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, in countries that have adopted an integrated approach, including such interventions as abolishing school fees, providing financial incentives, improving sanitation facilities, recruiting female teachers and reforming the curricula.

Conclusion

The International Federation of University Women and the Worldwide Organization for Women urge Governments, both from developing countries and from those countries that provide development assistance, to ensure that policies and programmes are put in place and that the necessary financial resources are provided to ensure that girls can enjoy full access to secondary education that provides a sound basis for their economic future. Such access and retention in secondary education will help to enable girls to progress to higher education or further training, to find gainful employment and to prevent a life of poverty.